

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 841

SP 023 459

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 TITLE Transition into College Sports: The Freshman Student-Athlete.
 PUB DATE Oct 83
 NOTE 2lp.; Paper presented at a Meeting of the North American Society of Sport Sociology (St. Louis, MO, October 27-30, 1983).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Academic Education; *Athletes; Athletic Coaches; Athletics; *Attitude Change; *College Freshmen; Higher Education; Intercollegiate Cooperation; Self Concept; *Student Attitudes; *Student College Relationship; Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

Changes in attitude, motivation, and values take place in the academic, athletic, and social areas of student-athletes' lives during their freshman year of college. Twenty incoming college freshman athletes involved in "revenue" sports (football, basketball, and ice hockey) participated in this study and were interviewed in the fall and again in the spring. Between interviews an increase was noted in the number of athletes who considered their roles as students as being of foremost importance, and a heightened awareness among the student-athletes of the possibility of personal injury. In the spring interview, there was evidence that the student-athletes had a more realistic assessment of individual academic ability and chances of getting a degree, as well as chances of a professional career in sport. In the fall, 70 percent of the incoming student-athletes felt they needed tutoring in math and English. This need was largely alleviated in the course of the year, and by spring they relied less on the coaching staff for academic advice and guidance. There was an increased perception among the student athletes that the overriding concern of the institution and coaches was the success of the "team" rather than the individual athlete. While this perception did not alienate the students, they tended to question their role in the university. (JD)

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ED238841

Transition Into College Sports: The Freshman Student-Athlete

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ABSTRACT

Recently there has been a great concern over the quality of education received by student-athletes. However, there is only a paucity of research which attempts to document the environmental changes which the student-athlete undergoes during the course of their collegiate "career." A cohort of student-athletes in three major sports at an NCAA Division I institution were interviewed twice during their freshman year. These interviews, conducted during the early Fall and late Spring, attempted to delineate changes and adaptations in the primary areas of the student-athlete's environment: academic, athletic and social. Results illustrated shifts in the perceived importance of specific aspects of the student-athlete's collegiate environment.

Paper presented at the North American Society of Sport Sociology, St. Louis, MO, October 27-30, 1983.

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The majority of research on the relationship of sport participation and education has focused at the high school level (Braddock, 1980). Studies which have used college athletes as subjects have focused on indicators of success such as graduation rates and grade-point-average (Purdy, Eitzen and Hufnagel, 1982; Harrison, 1976; Roper and Snow, 1976; Pilapil, Strecklin and Liu, 1970). Thus, previous research has neglected to analyze the dynamics which occur in the student-athlete's environment which may have a large influence on success. The focus of this paper is to explore the changes which take place in the academic, athletic, and social areas of student-athlete lives during the freshman year of college.

A theoretical perspective useful for understanding the changes which occur in the life of a student-athlete is value/expectancy theory (Lewin, 1951). Since motivation also is an important concept in discussing changes in an individual's values and goals, Vroom's (1964) extension of Lewin's (1951) theory to specifically incorporate motivation is reviewed. Vroom's application of motivation to value/expectancy theory is based on the following two premises: (1) people subjectively assign values to the expected outcomes of various causes of action and, therefore, have preferences among the expected outcomes; and (2) any explanation of motivated behavior must take into account not only the ends which individuals hope to achieve but the extent to which they believe that their own actions contribute to producing the preferred outcomes.

The application of this theoretical model to the student-athlete's environment is seen to function in the following manner. First, the athlete is recruited to participate in sport and accomplish certain academic goals. Using the first premise previously discussed, an individual's motivation to perform depends partially on the average of all possible perceived outcomes

associated with effective performance. For example, effort or hard work may be seen as a means of achieving effective performance. Effective performance, in turn, is a means to achieving additional outcomes, such as, recognition by coaches, teammates, and spectators as well as security for the individual within the team's hierarchy.

Second, motivation to perform also depends on expectations that the individual can successfully accomplish the task and expectations that performance will result in the desired outcome. Accordingly, if athletes give preference to recognition as a desirable outcome of their behavior, their motivation will depend on the degree to which the athletes believe they can perform effectively and the degree to which the individual believes a high level of effort will produce the desired results. On the other hand, if individuals are seeking alternative goals, such as satisfaction, task accomplishment, or increased rewards, in addition to recognition, the performance must permit them to attain these other preferred outcomes.

Athletes may place great value on achieving a particular goal. However, if they do not believe that anything they do will affect the outcome, they will not be moved to act. At this juncture, a reevaluation occurs producing an altered set of expectations. Furthermore, if athletes believe their actions can influence the desired outcome, but the outcome is of little importance, they will be less inclined to expend effort and act. Thus, the more the athlete values the result, and the more the anticipated result depends upon individual action, the higher the level of motivation to act.

Porter and Lawler (1968) extended this basic theory by arguing that if an individual perceives a high probability that valued rewards will result from the effort expended, then the motivation to put forth such effort will exist. However, poor performance may still result if: (1) the necessary abilities are lacking; or (2) the individual's perceptions of what is

required for effective performance is inaccurate. Therefore, adequate ability and accurate role perceptions are seen as necessary, though not sufficient, for performance.

This paper will delineate the changes which occurred in the "collegiate environment" of a group of student-athletes. This "collegiate environment" encompasses three dimensions for the student-athlete: academic, athletic, and social.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study consisted of structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes duration. The questions in the interviews were constructed by the authors to measure the type and degree of changes which collegiate student-athletes typically endure during the course of their freshman year.

Subjects for the interviews consisted of incoming freshman athletes in the "revenue" sports of football, basketball, and ice hockey. All freshmen basketball and hockey players were interviewed. However, due to time and staff limitations only half of the football players could be contacted. This selection was accomplished by alphabetizing the football roster and selecting every other name from the list. The final sample size for the fall set of interviews was 25.

During the spring term an effort was made to interview the entire set of subjects who had participated during the fall. However, due to individuals leaving the university, declining to participate in the follow-up interview, and being inaccessible, the sample size for the spring interviews numbered 20. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, the sample size of interviewees who participated during both the fall and spring terms was 20. The number of individuals in the sample by respective sports were football (13), basket-

ball (3), and hockey (4).

RESULTS

The findings discussed in this paper are preliminary results based on a fall/spring interview format. Two general findings which helped establish how individual athletes felt regarding the student-athlete role (Table 1) and identified several of their major concerns (Table 2) are reported. Table 1 reveals a shift toward considering oneself a student rather than an athlete. Between the fall and spring interviews there was a 20 percent increase in the number of student-athletes who considered their role of student as being of foremost importance.

In Table 2, one major and several minor changes in the perceived problems and concerns of the freshman student-athlete are delineated. While only one individual expressed this concern during the fall interview, seven (35%) athletes viewed the possibility of injury as a major concern during the spring. In addition, there was an increased concern over the organization of time, breaking away from home ties, and making the team. Since these individuals comprise a rather elite group of athletes (from having never been injured to, by virtue of their "star" status, having been somewhat coddled), these shifts are hardly surprising. However, these responses afford researchers the opportunity to understand the types and magnitudes of the changes which are confronting the freshman student-athlete.

Academic Concerns: two very important attitudes which must be addressed early in an individual "college career" are: (1) how do you compare to other students academically and (2) how good are your chances of earning a degree from the institution? The subjects were asked to appraise both questions. Table 3 reveals that as the school year progressed there was a slight polarization of individuals who considered themselves either above or below average

in academic terms compared to the general student population. This same general polarization occurred with respect to the subjects' assessment of their chances of obtaining a university degree (Table 4). In both instances, a more realistic appraisal of one's ability has occurred.

Data also reveal that student-athletes increased their average amount of weekly study time by 39 percent from fall to spring term. During the fall, the subjects estimated that they spent approximately 10.6 hours/week on their academic work. This increased to 14.7 hours/week for during the spring. Furthermore, during the fall, 65 percent of the student-athletes were spending less than 12 hours/week on their studies (approximately two hours per day), whereas during the spring this number had changed to where only 35 percent of the subjects spent less than 12 hours/week studying.

Another area dealing with the student-athlete's assessment of academic subject matter is their perception of areas where they may need extra help. Table 5 illustrates that 70 percent of incoming freshman student-athletes expressed a concern over needing some type of extra help. This help was concentrated in two areas; with seven students perceiving the need for math assistance, five indicating a need for English assistance, and two students stating they needed assistance in both areas. Spring interviews indicated that the need for English assistance had been alleviated. Only seven students were still seeking assistance in math.

When difficulty was encountered in the classroom, there was a heavy dependence upon the coaching staff to alleviate the problem, usually through the hiring of tutors. Fully 40 percent of the subjects relied upon this method of reducing academic difficulties. This remained constant throughout the year. However, in the spring there was a noticeable trend toward the use of friends and discussions with instructors.

In a similar vein, as the student-athletes became more familiar with

the university, there was less reliance on coaches and team members for suggestions of which classes the athlete should take. During registration for the fall and winter terms, the student-athlete was most likely to rely on the following individuals for assistance in the selection of courses: academic advisor (30%); other team members (20%); self (20%); coaches (15%). However, during registration for spring, and pre-registration for summer and fall terms, there was an increased dependence upon utilization of institutional mechanisms for the selection of courses. These were: academic advisor (45%); self (25%); and a departmental checklist, other students, and teammates (10% each). Thus, a substantial increase occurred in the area of academic advising and dependence on the coach completely disappeared.

Regarding the role of "student-athlete," only 15 percent of the subjects perceived any difficulty in "being a student" during the fall term. However, by the time of the spring interview, this percentage had increased to 55 percent. This shift may be accounted for by the athlete's preconception of his college role as primarily one of being an athlete and the "reality" of the academic effort needed to maintain his athlete status. However, much of the molding of this preconception may be due to the hoopla surrounding the recruitment of the athlete, not for his academic abilities but for his athletic skills.

Athletic Concerns: A goal of many high school athletic "stars" is to play professionally. Many of the incoming freshman athletes in our sample adhered to this "dream" during the fall interview (Table 7); with 45 percent of the subjects indicating that they perceived themselves as having a "good chance" to play professionally. By the time of the spring interview, and following a full season of collegiate participation, many athletes have aligned this goal with a more realistic assessment of their abilities. Thus, by spring of the freshman year the number of freshman athletes who perceived

- 7 -

themselves as possibly having a professional career in sports had dropped from 45 percent to 20 percent.

Another measure of "athletic reality" is an individual's perception of his ability when compared to that of other incoming freshmen. Table 8 shows the changes in this perception which occurred between the fall and spring interviews. Since the response to this question carries an implicit negative perception of a major component of the individual's self-esteem, there occurred a shift toward the middle range regarding ability level. The number of athletes who perceived themselves as being "one of the best" declined from ten to seven (15%); while the percentage of individuals who categorized their ability as "somewhere in the middle" increased by 20 percent (from seven to eleven athletes).

A final measure of changes in the athletes' perceptions of their ability was revealed in the athletic goals they had set for themselves (Table 9). Initially, seven athletes (35%) had set "being all-conference" as an athletic goal they hoped to achieve. By the spring, however, this number had decreased to four (20%). Subsequently, the percentage of those individuals who had realigned their goal to simply "being a starter" rose from 45 percent to 65 percent. Since these athletes are virtually assured continued financial support, as long as they maintain their eligibility and attend practices, there was little shift in concern for "making the team."

The data also revealed that the number of student-athletes who stated that they would like to remain on the team if financial support was withdrawn increased from 45 percent to 60 percent. While this percentage seems somewhat high, it may be attributed to status and recognition gained from participation, an intensified commitment to the sport or fellow athletes or possibly a self-justification for all the previous time invested.

Social Concerns: The only major social concern that was expressly

delineated during both the fall and spring interviews was the large time constraint, or lack of "free-time," placed upon the student-athlete. Also, the student-athlete became more acutely aware of his "status" at the university. This was reflected in an increased awareness of differential treatment regarding pre-registration and excused absences from class for road-trips. The freshman athlete felt that the quality of academic work expected of him should be comparable to that of other students. However, since the athlete viewed himself as serving the university, he expected reasonable adjustments in his class schedule similar to those afforded faculty and staff for performance of "professional" activities.

Two final revelations should be mentioned. First, there was an increased perception among the subjects that the overriding concern of the institution was for the "success" of the team, with secondary emphasis placed on the success of the individual student-athlete. The athletes readily acknowledged that they were "being used by the university;" however, as long as they felt that they were making academic progress, then this use was not viewed as exploitation, but as a situation of mutual benefit.

Second, and highly correlated to the first comment, there was an increased skepticism on the part of the student-athlete that the coaching staff was more interested in the athlete remaining eligible, rather than in reaching higher levels of academic development. These two concluding remarks appeared only during the spring interview and while not alienating the athlete, did instill in the athlete questions regarding his role within the university.

Additional research is needed to adequately assess the impact of sport participation on the student-athlete. While this research effort was an attempt to explore the specific changes which occur during the freshman year, these athletes must be followed in a longitudinal manner to establish the extent of the impact and how the student's assessment of "reality" changes his

goals, both athletically and academically, during the course of his collegiate career.

TABLE 1

"When you think of yourself, which comes first: Being a student or being an athlete?"

	<u>Fall</u> <u>%</u>	<u>Spring</u> <u>%</u>
Student first	50 (10)*	70 (14)
Both	10 (2)	15 (3)
Athlete first	40 (8)	15 (3)

*N given in parentheses.

TABLE 2

Major Problems and Concerns of the Freshman Student-Athlete
(Three rankings were given)

	Fall				Spring			
	Rank				Rank			
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>Total</u>
Getting good grades	16	3	-	19	15	1	1	17
Selecting courses	-	2	1	3	-	2	1	3
Choosing a major	1	3	1	5	2	-	2	4
Knowing how to study	2	2	1	5	1	3	2	6
Meeting other students	-	1	4	5	-	1	3	4
Getting injured	-	1	-	1	-	2	5	7
Organizing time	1	1	2	4	2	5	1	8
Making the team	-	4	1	5	-	3	4	7
Breaking away from home	-	-	2	2	-	3	1	4

TABLE 3

"In academic terms, do you see yourself as above average, average, or below average?"

	<u>Fall</u> <u>%</u>	<u>Spring</u> <u>%</u>
Above average	15 (3)*	25 (5)
Average	80 (16)	65 (13)
Below average	5 (1)	10 (2)

*N give in parentheses.

TABLE 4

"How do you view your chances of earning a degree?"

	<u>Fall</u> <u>%</u>	<u>Spring</u> <u>%</u>
Very good	55 (11)*	60 (12)
Pretty good	40 (8)	30 (6)
Not very good	5 (1)	10 (2)

*N given in parentheses.

TABLE 5

"Do you feel that you will need any extra help or assistance in your studies?"

	<u>Fall %</u>	<u>Spring %</u>
Yes	70 (14)*	35 (7)
No	30 (6)	65 (13)

*N given in parentheses.

TABLE 6

"Have you found it difficult to be a student while attending college?"

	<u>Fall %</u>	<u>Spring %</u>
Yes	15 (3)*	55 (11)
No	85 (17)	45 (9)

*N given in parentheses.

TABLE 7

"Do you see yourself having a good chance to play professionally?"

	<u>Fall %</u>	<u>Spring %</u>
Yes	45 (9)*	20 (4)
No	35 (7)	55 (11)
Don't know	20 (4)	25 (5)

*N given in parentheses.

TABLE 8

"When you compare yourself to other freshmen on the team in terms of athletic ability, do you see yourself as one of the best, somewhere in the middle, or not as good as others."

	<u>Fall</u> <u>%</u>	<u>Spring</u> <u>%</u>
One of the best	50 (10)*	35 (7)
Somewhere in the middle	35 (7)	55 (11)
Not as good as others	15 (3)	10 (2)

*N given in parentheses.

TABLE 9

"What are some of the goals you have set for yourself as a college player?"*

	<u>Fall %</u>	<u>Spring %</u>
Making the team	15 (3)**	10 (2)
Being a starter	45 (9)	65 (13)
Being all-conference	35 (7)	20 (4)
Being all-american	5 (1)	5 (1)

*Highest mentioned goal was used for analysis.

**N given in parentheses.

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